

HEGEL'S CONCEPT OF ACTION

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INTRODUCTION

The volume of literature devoted to Hegel might lead one to suspect that the central concepts, theses, and insights of his philosophy have been exhaustively explicated. It is therefore surprising that there remain significant gaps in the scholarship, gaps in areas not only of historical interest, or on questions internal to the system, but rather concerning fundamental concepts of Hegel's philosophy itself. Just such a gap seems to me to exist with the concept of *action*. Although action is explicitly introduced in a prominent place in Hegel's system – namely, in the Morality chapter of the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*¹ – there are hardly any contributions to the scholarship that investigate Hegel's action-theoretic premises and the insights underlying his concept of action. This is surprising for at least three reasons. First, the text of the *Philosophy of Right* shows that Hegel does not use his concept of action simply in the everyday sense; his aim is to unpack the concept philosophically. Second, action-theoretic problems have been thoroughly examined in the last forty years of analytic philosophy. Much progress has been made in the field that can help to explicate Hegel's thought.² Further, this omission in the scholarship is amazing because Hegel's social philosophy, ethics, and critique of morality have always stood at the center of interest in his thought. But it is highly improbable that these parts of Hegel's philosophy are independent of his concept of action. That was at least – and on this point

1 In the text, I use *Philosophy of Right* to refer to this work.

2 When I speak in this book of "action-theory," I do not mean a specific position, but rather the entire sub-discipline of analytic philosophy.

I concur – the opinion of the first commentator on Hegel’s Morality chapter:

Before the content of moral action is developed, the nature of action itself has to be examined.³

Michelet, whose commentary on the Morality chapter of the *Philosophy of Right* has unjustly been almost forgotten, had at his disposal only the action-theoretic meditations of Aristotle as a point of reference (in addition, of course, to the logic internal to the system of Hegel’s philosophy). I can, by contrast, draw on a much broader range of methods and philosophical positions.

Two Research Areas of Modern Action-Theory

In the debate about action-theoretic questions, a debate that has become increasingly prominent in recent years, two central problem areas can be identified: They are demarcated with the terms “justification of action” and “explanation of action.” Philosophical problems raised by our praxis of justification of actions include the clarification of the concepts “attribution” or “intentionality,” and the analysis of the description-dependence of actions. Problems that arise through our praxis of explanation of action are the status of descriptions of action (causal explanations or not?), the status of reasons (events?), and the connection of actions and bodily movements. Authors who primarily devote themselves to the research area of justification of action consider description-dependence to be especially central, whereas authors who want to analyze the status of the explanation of actions have focused on the event-character of actions. But both directions of inquiry are oriented by central problems in the analysis of action and in determining the conceptual framework with which we describe actions.

Hegel, as one might already suspect from the place where he chose to introduce the concept of action, dealt primarily with the problem of the justification of action. One finds in his philosophy of right, analyses of attribution and justification that are motivated by an interest in sorting out the difficulties of the description-dependence of actions with regard

3 Michelet 1828, p. 17 f. On the method of citation, see my remarks in the list of abbreviations used.

to their evaluation. This book will therefore deal predominantly with this research area.

The Theses and Claims of this Book

The book was written out of a strong thematic interest in action-theoretic questions, but is primarily intended to elucidate a central concept of Hegel's philosophy. I also follow a systematic concern in that I do not interpret Hegel's argumentation in an exclusively internal manner, but rather I critically examine its actual content and explanatory worth. As much as possible, I will support Hegel's position from a systematic perspective; where it does not appear tenable to me, I have not tried to defend it on internal grounds.

Two principal theses guide this investigation: (1) I maintain that one can uncover the consistency of the logical structure and argumentation of §§105-125 of the *Philosophy of Right* if one understands them as dealing with action-theoretic problems. Hegel's arguments in the Morality chapter of the *Philosophy of Right* have often been criticized both as opaque and as attempting to force together heterogeneous theoretical issues. This impression disappears when one understands his arguments as elements of a theory of action. (2) On the systematic side, I hold the thesis that Hegel succeeded in developing a theory of intentional action that foreshadows and unifies many insights of contemporary authors. Hegel analyzed – as today, for example, Castañeda does – the specific logical form of knowledge of action as a “first-person proposition,” and thereby grasped an important characteristic of freely chosen intentions. He further distinguished – as, for example, Anscombe and Davidson do – the event-aspect from the description-aspect of actions. This allows Hegel to keep appropriately separate questions of event-causality and attribution. In addition, he succeeds in logically distinguishing and specifying different kinds of intentions (and the matter thereof). Hegel thereby anticipates the insights of Anscombe and Goldman, as well as approaches that are now being developed in a kind of action-theory that I will call action-plan theory (Goldman, Brand, or Bratman). It should be kept in mind that Hegel was in a position – by virtue of his philosophical concepts and method – to grasp the central insights of action theory and to integrate them into *one* approach. An important result for current philosophers, then, is that Hegel's action-theory contains elements that are often – with the exception of Castañeda – neglected today. A

dialogue with Hegel's action-theory should therefore be systematically fruitful for contemporary approaches.

The theme of this book is limited to the question of Hegel's concept of action. There are several problem areas that border on this concept, but they cannot all be investigated here. Thus, for example, I will only sketch (in the concluding comments) the aspects of Hegel's dissolution of the mind-body problem that are relevant for action-theory. So too I can only interpret his theory of the will to the extent that it is immediately relevant to my central question. Likewise, I will not thematize questions in political philosophy and ethics: Action theory will be understood in this book as a discipline of theoretical philosophy. For that reason, I will almost completely leave out considerations arising from the context – namely, political philosophy – of Hegel's argument.⁴

On the Question of Hegel's System

Anyone who undertakes an analysis of Hegel's philosophy with a certain question in mind, and hence picks out a partial aspect of the theory, unavoidably faces the problem of coming to terms with the systematic character of Hegel's thought. Like perhaps no other philosopher, Hegel anchored his basic ideas in the System and its conceptual framework. His method of argumentation and presentation is also not detachable from his fundamental premises.⁵ For that reason, I will briefly explain how I deal in this book with this difficulty.

All the central concepts, and the justificatory strength of the dialectical argumentation on which Hegel relies, are derived from logic. Hartmann's sentence is thus still valid: "Without interpreting it [the logic/M. Quante] all study of Hegel is nonsense."⁶ Nonetheless, in this book I do not make Hegel's logic an object of investigation. I relate the conceptual framework of the *Philosophy of Right* to Hegel's logic in order to unfold the meaning internal to the system as accurately as possible.⁷ I will not, however, attempt to justify Hegel's speculative method, so

4 This context certainly belongs to the most thoroughly researched areas of Hegel's philosophy. It should also be noted that Hegel himself would not have agreed without reservation to my procedure: For him the concept of action should be explicated within the realm of practical philosophy.

5 Compare on this problem, Fulda 1989.

6 Hartmann 1957, p. 216.

7 In my understanding of Hegel's logic, I follow the results of Düsing 1984, Fulda 1989a, Henrich 1976 and 1978, Horstmann 1990, and Siep 1991.

I do not invoke it as an argumentative basis for Hegel's statements. I have instead constantly attempted to support Hegel's theses through arguments won from the phenomena and grounded in matters of fact. Only in the portrayal of Hegel's argumentative structure will his logic be used as a kind of "universal currency" of explanation. My systematic justification of Hegel's action-theory, on the other hand, does not rely on his System. This approach to Hegel's dialectical method offers the advantage that even a reader who has no confidence in Hegel's method can follow the content of the arguments of Hegel's action-theory.

A Guide for Reading the Text

Parts I and II are conceived so that they can be read independently of each other. Part I, in which I relate Hegel's arguments to action-theoretic problems, can serve as a commentary on §§104-113 of the *Philosophy of Right*. In Part II, the structure of Hegel's text is no longer used as the guide; there, systematic questions of action-theory stand at the forefront of the discussion. Even so, this part can also serve as a commentary on §§114-125.

Part I deals with Hegel's theory of the subjective will, examining those aspects containing action-theoretic claims. I first specify the conceptual presuppositions from which Hegel starts (Chapter 1). I then analyze the specific form of the subjective end (Chapter 2). The intentionality of free and attributable action rests on this specific form of the subjective end. After a summary of the results of Part I (Chapter 3), I deal in Part II with Hegel's concept of action. First, I specify the general category of action-theory (Chapter 4), highlighting the relationship between causation and attribution and the various modes of description of an action. After the explication of the form of action, I investigate Hegel's statements relating to "that which is aimed at" [*das Worumwillen*] in human action (Chapter 5). With this analysis of the content of action, I thematize both the rationality of action and the relationship of action and morality. In the Conclusion, Part III, I summarize the results of my investigation and sketch an interpretation of Hegel's dissolution of the mind-body problem, one that is compatible with the interpretation of Hegel's action-theory presented here.

The central question of this investigation provides two interpretive advantages: First, it allows, by means of a special and philosophically central problem, a wide-ranging view of Hegel's philosophy. Second, it allows a reconstruction of his action-theory that is largely independent

of his onto-theological and methodological premises. For that reason I agree with Taylor:

Of course, for any highly systematic body of thought like Hegel's we can reconstruct the whole from many perspectives. Each one gives us something, though some are more illuminating than others. I believe that looking at Hegel's thought from the angle of the underlying conception of action provides one of the more interesting perspectives on the whole.⁸

I am convinced, then, that looking at Hegel's action-theory is not only a "more interesting perspective" on his philosophy; rather, it reveals a systematically fertile part of Hegel's philosophy.

8 Cf. Taylor 1983, p. 1.